I

British military strategy

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Introduction: ‘the British way in warfare’

In the course of the long eighteenth century, the British developed a grand strategy that was designed to minimize their weaknesses and play to their strengths. Labelled in the 1930s by the journalist and strategist Sir Basil Liddell Hart as ‘the British way in warfare’, it has been dismissed as a strategy of avoidance. The British expected their European allies to raise large armies to defeat their common enemies on the Continent, while the British employed their powerful navy and small army to protect and enlarge their overseas empire. But in reality, the strategic culture that the British developed after 1688, as they emerged as one of the European great powers, was more complex. In the eighteenth century, the British did pour millions of pounds into maintaining a large and technologically sophisticated navy. But the navy did not just exist to enlarge the empire. It also served to deter continental powers from invading Britain, and prevented the nation from starving. Unable to feed their population from their own resources, the British developed a worldwide system of maritime trade, which had to be protected in wartime if the British were to be able to continue fighting.

But confronted by a power with ambitions to fasten its hegemony over Western Europe, such as France under Louis XIV or Napoleon, or the Kaiser’s Reich, the British knew that they could not avoid becoming involved in European affairs. However, their own relatively small population meant that they could not hope to prevail unless they fought alongside continental allies, who could make good their own deficiencies in manpower, and binding such allies into a secure relationship required the British to take on a share of their common burden. Maritime power alone would not suffice. Their allies also insisted that they commit soldiers to the
Continent to fight alongside them, and that they divert some of the wealth generated by their burgeoning overseas trade and industrial might to subsidize them.

The final defeat of Napoleon in 1815 represented the triumphant vindication of this policy. A stable preponderance of power had been established on the European continent that was to last until the 1870s, while outside Europe, Britain had eliminated the empires of its European rivals. Coupled with their naval deterrent, the British discovered that carefully calculated political concessions – a policy that was later labelled appeasement – could buy off threats from most potential enemies. It was a policy that worked around the turn of the twentieth century to eliminate threats from two great power rivals, France and Tsarist Russia. But it did not work against the Kaiser’s Germany. The result was that between 1914 and 1918, the British had no option other than to resort to their strategy of burden-sharing and commit a huge army to the Western Front.

The human and financial cost of doing so was horrendous. It was, therefore, unsurprising that when the post-war settlement began to crumble in the 1930s, as Japan, Germany and Italy emerged as revisionist powers, that many British policy-makers were reluctant to repeat the exercise. In 1934–35, the General Staff, contemplating the possibility that they might again have to dispatch an expeditionary force to fight alongside France to contain Germany, prepared a programme to modernize and expand their small army. But their political masters first scaled back their plans and then, in early 1938, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, quashed them. There was to be no British continental commitment. Chamberlain hoped that a combination of appeasement and deterrence would enable Britain to avoid another bloody continental commitment and prevent hostilities elsewhere. The RAF was to be built up to deter Germany, while most of the fleet was to be stationed in the Mediterranean. Its immediate task was to deter Mussolini, but it might also be required to sail to the Far East to give teeth to Britain’s Far Eastern deterrent, the naval base and fortress at Singapore. What might happen if Italy and Japan acted in concert and the fleet was required to be in two places at once was a question left unanswered until 1941. The army’s roles were to contribute to the air defence of Great Britain by manning anti-aircraft guns, and to garrison the ports and coaling stations that the fleet depended on for its worldwide mobility.

The long-haul strategy, 1939–1940

Following the Munich crisis and the German occupation of Prague in March 1939, Britain’s strategy of avoiding a continental commitment began to unravel with alarming speed. British governments in the Edwardian period had been able to appease France and Russia because, thanks to Britain’s relative economic power, they could maintain a credible level of armaments to deter their rivals. Further, neither France nor Russia before 1914 had tried to create a new world order, so political compromises over secondary issues were possible. But by the late 1930s that had changed. The Axis Powers sought to rearrange the global balance of power in ways that would leave little room for Britain to remain a major power.

Faced by so many threats, the British once again looked for allies with whom to share their burdens. They were hard to find. The Russians had succumbed to Communism in 1917 and were not to be trusted, and the USA had withdrawn into isolation after 1919. That only left France. When the Chamberlain government had abandoned a continental role for the British Army, it had ignored the possibility that French morale might collapse unless the British gave them significant support on land. But now the Foreign Office reported the spread of defeatism in France, and in February 1939 the Chiefs of Staff warned the Cabinet that Britain would have to play a role in the land defence of France, for if they did not, some French politicians might opt for a rapprochement with Germany.

This was the background against which, in the spring of 1939, the Chiefs of Staff Committee prepared plans for a war against Italy and Germany. They were based on two assumptions: the French army was strong enough to forestall a German advance in the west with, initially, only minimal British support on land, and that time was on the side of the Allies. They planned for a long war that would fall into three stages. The Treasury believed that if Germany continued to borrow to finance its rearmament programme, it would soon face bankruptcy. Hence it was bound to try to win quickly by mounting a massive offensive in the west against France. The British would do what they could to help the French, which, given the size of the British Army, would amount to very little, while retaining control of Egypt, from where they hoped to mount an eventual counter-offensive against Italy. In the meantime, it would be essential to maintain peace in the Far East, because the fleet would be tied down in the Mediterranean and could not be dispatched to Singapore until after Italy’s defeat. If matters went according to plan, the initial German offensive would be checked in a matter of a couple of months, and the war
would then enter its second phase. The Allies would mobilize their own resources and, thanks to the Royal Navy’s command of the seas, draw upon those of their colonies and neutral trading partners, while simultaneously weakening Italy and Germany by a combination of propaganda and economic blockade. The third phase would begin about two years after the start of hostilities, when, with their own forces fully mobilized, the Allies would mount a counter-offensive into Germany and crush their main enemy.
These plans were broadly accepted by the French in April 1939. But in doing so they bought into a strategy that was flawed. Although the German economy was fragile, and the British blockade did place it under real pressure, it was more resilient than the British assumed, and their own economy was not as robust as they had hoped. The Royal Navy alone could not give them access to overseas supplies. They had to be paid for, and in a long struggle in which manpower and factory capacity were diverted from producing exports to manufacturing and manning tanks, warships and aircraft, Britain’s balance of payments might collapse. By 1939, Britain was producing more tanks and aircraft than was Germany, but, as the Treasury warned, it could only maintain that level of production for a limited period. However, with their opponent’s rearmament so far ahead of them that they could not hope to win a short war, the British thought they had no option but to try to win a long one.

War preparations did not mean that deterrence was dead. In March 1939, the British government reacted to rumours of an impending German attack on Poland by promising the Poles their support, guarantees they soon extended to Romania and Greece. They did this not so as to create a military coalition to fight Germany, but in the hope that their guarantees would deter the Germans from fighting in the first place. The Territorial Army was doubled in size and military conscription was introduced, as further gestures to signal Britain’s new resolve. The Chiefs of Staff welcomed the guarantees because they might persuade the Germans to retain forces in the east, and so give the British and French more time to prepare their own defences. But, convinced that Romania and Poland could only resist briefly, they saw no need to prepare plans to give them military assistance. Only the Soviet Union might have been in a position to give them tangible military help. But the Conservative politicians of Britain’s national government had spent too much of their careers denouncing communism to be able to look to Stalin with any enthusiasm for help; and in any case, after the Great Purges, British military intelligence had a low estimation of Soviet military effectiveness. Even so, in August 1939, the British did join the French in embarking on half-hearted negotiations with the Soviets to create a diplomatic front they hoped would deter Hitler from going to war.

But the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on 23 August forestalled them, and when Germany attacked Poland in September 1939, deterrence had palpably

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failed. The Chiefs of Staff’s predictions that Poland would be unable to withstand a German invasion proved accurate, not least because Poland found itself invaded not just by Germany, but also by the Soviets, and by the end of September it had surrendered. In some respects, Britain’s strategic situation appeared to be better than the Chiefs of Staff had envisaged, for Italy and Japan had not taken advantage of Britain’s preoccupation with Germany to attack their empire. But in the winter of 1939–40, the efficacy of the long-haul strategy that the British and French had hoped to pursue began to be questioned, first in France, and then in Britain. The blockade was working more slowly than they had hoped. Germany could draw vital supplies from Scandinavia and the Soviet Union, and seemed to be growing in strength. The British did not embrace French suggestions to open an eastern front in the Balkans, but they had their own advocates of the need for a more vigorous war policy. The foremost critic of the national government’s defence policy in the 1930s, Winston Churchill, had joined the War Cabinet in September 1939 as First Lord of the Admiralty. He soon proved to be a difficult colleague for the Prime Minister. Their differences focused on three issues: the eventual size of the British Army, military intervention in Scandinavia, and plans to disrupt the German economy by floating mines down the Rhine. The ease with which the Luftwaffe had overwhelmed the Polish air force and pinned the Polish army to the ground only reinforced Chamberlain’s conviction that the British needed a more powerful air force, and he did not see how that could be reconciled with an effort to build up the army to a force of fifty-five divisions. But Churchill insisted that anything less would be unacceptable to the French, who would see it as a sign that the British were intent on avoiding the blood-tax of a continental land war and were determined instead to fight the war to the last Frenchman. In September 1939, the Cabinet’s Land Forces Committee recommended that Britain should attempt to produce 2,250 planes per month and enough equipment for a fifty-five-division army. Chamberlain was eventually won over and agreed that Britain must have a big army and air force. But he was harder to convince on the other two issues.

The British believed that the German war economy was heavily dependent on oil supplies from the Soviet Caucasus, and Swedish iron ore exported to Germany through the Norwegian port of Narvik. This led them to contemplate two reckless gambles. One involved mounting air attacks on the Soviet oil fiends at Baku, plans that fortunately came to nothing; and the second was the dispatch of troops to seize possession of the Swedish iron ore mines and to help the Finns, who in November 1939 had been attacked by Russia.
The French were opposed to mining the Rhine because it might provoke the Germans into taking reprisals against their own industries. But they originally welcomed operations in Scandinavia. Not only would they hurt the German war economy, but they would keep the fighting at a safe distance from France. Chamberlain eventually acquiesced because of reports that there were limits to French readiness to maintain mobilization unaccompanied by military operations, and because they blamed the British for the inactivity of the Phoney War. Fortunately for long-term British interests, Finnish resistance collapsed before Allied troops could reach them, so they did not add Russia to their enemies. But in all other respects, the dispatch of Anglo-French forces to Norway in April 1940 was a disaster. The Germans landed just ahead of them, and although the German navy suffered crippling losses, they established enough troops on the ground to force the British and French into a series of humiliating and costly evacuations.

War without major allies, June 1940–December 1941

The evacuation of Norway marked the start of a political and strategic revolution in Britain. On 10 May 1940, the same day that the Germans invaded Holland, Belgium and France, Chamberlain resigned, and Churchill became Prime Minister of a coalition government. By the end of May, British and French troops, who had rushed to the assistance of Belgium and Holland, had been driven into a pocket and were being evacuated from Dunkirk. Less than a month later, France signed an armistice, with the result that the foundation of British military strategy, the assumption that the French army would at least be strong enough to hold the Germans in the west, had collapsed. After briefly considering and rejecting the possibility of a negotiated peace, Churchill’s government decided that there could be no peace short of total victory. But how they were to secure that, bereft as they were of continental allies, was problematic. They found themselves with no options other than to do what an earlier British government had done when faced by a similar crisis. The defence of the home islands had to be their first priority, and in the summer of 1940, RAF Fighter Command and the superiority enjoyed by the Royal Navy in home waters sufficed to deter a German invasion. This was Hitler’s first major strategic setback since the start of the

war. But the British could not win the war merely by defending themselves. The army had left most of its heavy equipment behind in France, and it would be many years before it would be possible for it to return to the Continent. In the meantime, they had to find ways of carrying the war to Germany, and they hoped they could do this by a combination of economic blockade, air attacks, propaganda and subversion.\(^4\)

British intelligence continued to assume that the German war economy was already fully mobilized, and that consequently Germany would be vulnerable to a combination of air attacks on its industrial cities and economic blockade. However, like so many of the ideas that underpinned British military strategy in the early part of the war, this was based on wishful thinking. The German economy was only partially mobilized in 1940, and German war production did not peak until 1944. Furthermore, the Germans could avoid some of the most threatening consequences of the blockade by drawing upon the resources of the countries they had conquered in 1940–41. The efforts of the blockade and the bomber were to be supplemented by the work of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). Churchill had been deeply impressed by the success of the Irish Republican Army between 1919 and 1921 in loosening Britain’s grip on Southern Ireland, and in July 1940 he created SOE to organize guerrilla resistance in occupied Europe.\(^5\) In September 1940, the Chiefs of Staff optimistically predicted that the Wehrmacht, paralysed by guerrilla attacks and shortages of essential supplies, would collapse under its own weight by 1942. The British Army would then be able to return to the Continent, not to fight expensive battles of attrition, but to accept the Germans’ surrender. Faith in the bomber, the blockade and subversion had thus expanded to fill the vacuum at the heart of British military strategy left by the collapse of the French army. Despite their uncertain foundations in reality, these beliefs became deeply ingrained in the minds of British military strategists, and help to explain their opposition to American proposals for a cross-Channel invasion between 1942 and 1944. And underpinning all these calculations was the hope that either the USA or the USSR would conclude that they could not allow Britain to go under, or that the Germans would make the egregious mistake of dragging one or both of them into the war.

Italy declared war on Britain in June 1940, and posed an immediate threat to the British Empire in the Mediterranean and Middle East, a threat that was

\(^4\) Chiefs of Staff, British strategy in a certain eventuality, 25 May 1940. TNA CAB 66/7/48.

doubly dangerous because the French fleet could no longer contain Mussolini’s navy. Indeed, there was a possibility that the Germans might seize it, and to prevent that from happening, Churchill exhibited a streak of ruthlessness. When part of the French fleet at anchor in the Algerian port of Mers-el-Kébir refused to intern itself, he ordered that it be sunk. It was a measure of how vital they regarded their hold on their Mediterranean and Middle Eastern possessions that in August 1940, with an invasion of Britain still possible, the War Cabinet risked sending 150 precious tanks to Egypt. Between December 1940 and February 1941, they enabled the greatly outnumbered but more mobile Western Desert Force to drive the Italians from Cyrenaica, and for a short time it seemed that the British would be able to eliminate the Italian Empire in North Africa. However, in March 1941, Hitler invaded the Balkans. The British feared that by doing so he would be able to break the blockade, spread discontent among the Arab populations of Britain’s client states in the Middle East, and cut Britain’s communications between the Mediterranean and its Far Eastern empire. Consequently, they diverted the troops that might have been able to conquer the Italian Empire in Tripolitania to the Balkans, in a vain attempt to buttress Greek resistance against the Axis Powers. By April 1941, what was left of their forces were evacuated from mainland Greece, while in the meantime, the arrival of a small German expeditionary force, under the command of Erwin Rommel, enabled the Axis to reoccupy Cyrenaica.

To write of the British war effort in the Middle East between 1940 and 1943 is a misnomer, for the land war was, in reality, a British imperial, rather than a purely British undertaking. Before 1939, the Chiefs of Staff had calculated that in a long war the empire would represent a major military asset, not because the colonies and Dominions could manufacture weapons and munitions in large quantities, but because they could provide large numbers of soldiers, and they were right in this. Between 1940 and 1942, the British concentrated most of their own army in the United Kingdom, where they prepared to meet a German invasion. Elsewhere they relied heavily on manpower from their overseas possessions to do the fighting. Thus, for example, in October 1941, nearly three-quarters of the combat divisions allocated to the Eighth Army in North Africa were drawn from the empire. It was the forces of the colonies and Dominions that allowed the British to safeguard their interests in the Middle East in the first half of the war.

By the middle of 1941 it was becoming implausible to believe that bombers, the blockade and subversion would together cause the collapse of Hitler’s empire. It was, therefore, extraordinarily fortunate for the British that in the second half of the year they gained two allies whose combined military strength, when it was fully mobilized, meant that the defeat of the Axis Powers would only be a matter of time. Initially, however, the British were almost blind to their good luck. When Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, few policy-makers thought that the Russians would be able to resist for long. Initially, they saw Russia’s entry into the war not as an opportunity to rethink their own strategy from first principles, but as a short-term opportunity to be grasped. Consequently, when the Soviets asked them to mount an invasion, or at least a large-scale raid on the coast of Western Europe to divert German divisions westward, they hardly considered it, contenting themselves merely with intensifying their air attacks on Germany. Meanwhile, Churchill encouraged his commanders in North Africa to take the opportunity of Germany’s preoccupation in Russia to mount a counter-offensive in Libya, while simultaneously the British worked with the Russians to eliminate German influence from Persia and Iraq. It was only in September 1941 that Churchill had sufficient confidence in the Soviets’ ability to resist the Wehrmacht that he inaugurated a large-scale Lend-Lease programme to assist Russia. Henceforth the British recognized that a new and permanent factor had entered into their military calculations; they now had an ally with an army that was sufficiently powerful to match the Germans on the Continent.

By then, the British had acquired a second major ally. In 1935, Chamberlain had tried to appease Japan by negotiating a Far Eastern Non-Aggression Pact. When he failed, the British were thrown back on deterrence. At the May 1937 Imperial Conference, the Admiralty explained that the Singapore naval base was the cornerstone of imperial defence in the Far East, and that in an emergency it hoped to send between eight and ten capital ships to Far Eastern waters. But what the British carefully avoided promising was that those ships would be dispatched even if a war had already broken out in Europe, and in mid-1940, the collapse of France and the belligerence of Italy made that a pressing issue. Churchill opted to concentrate British and imperial resources in the Mediterranean and Middle East, and to avoid war with the Japanese for as long as possible. Staff talks that began in October...

1940 with the Dutch, Americans and the Dominions only highlighted the deficiencies in all of their Far Eastern war preparations. What the British most wanted was for the Americans to send their fleet to Singapore, something that might have given the Singapore deterrent strategy real teeth, but they refused. Once it was apparent that the Japanese would not be appeased, Churchill could only opt for a weak deterrent. Rather than send between eight and ten capital ships, he could only scrape together two, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. They arrived in December 1941, and were promptly sunk by Japanese aircraft. The land defences of Malaya were in no better shape. Troops that might have been able to block a Japanese advance had been retained in the Middle East, and those that were available were either badly trained or were road-bound because they had been prepared for mobile operations in the Middle East which required masses of motor transport. Consequently, they repeatedly found themselves outflanked by more lightly equipped, but more agile Japanese forces. Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942, and by May they had conquered not only Malaya but also Burma, and arrived at the northeastern frontier of India. From the British point of view, the only good thing to come out of these calamities was that the Japanese had begun this new phase of their war of an expansion in the Far East by attacking the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, thus precipitating the entry of the USA into the war on Britain’s side.

**Burden-sharing, 1942–1944**

Even before Pearl Harbor, the British and Americans had reached a major decision about their future strategy. In February 1941, they agreed that if the USA entered the war, it would follow the British lead and accord priority to the war against Germany, deploying only sufficient forces in the Far East to contain Japan. This decision was quickly reaffirmed at the ARCADIA conference in December 1941, when Churchill and Roosevelt met as allies for the first time. It was entirely consistent with the Churchill government’s larger strategic objectives. Between Dunkirk and Pearl Harbor, their overriding aim had been to ensure national survival. But after the entry of the USA into the war, and once they were convinced that the Soviet Union would not collapse, they realized that the combined human and economic resources of the Allies meant that they would eventually wear down their enemies.

Henceforth, therefore, Britain’s main goal was to ensure that Allied military strategy evolved in ways that were consistent with Britain’s own strategic and political interests. The war against Germany had to have priority because, unlike Japan, Germany posed a direct and immediate threat to the security of the British home islands.

The British also recognized that the USA’s entry into the war would enable them to revert to the kind of attritional strategy they had agreed with France in 1939. At ARCADIA, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed that the Germans could be worn down by the Russian army, supplied with Western war materiel, combined with large-scale air and amphibious raids mounted from Britain. They would isolate the European Axis Powers and tighten the blockade by occupying North Africa and by persuading Turkey to join the alliance. That, in turn, would both reduce the strain on Allied shipping by reopening the Mediterranean, and, Churchill hoped, culminate in the surrender of Italy. Only then would a final assault be launched against Germany, with simultaneous land operations mounted by the Russians, the Americans and the British.

The British and Americans took one other important decision at ARCADIA, which was to establish the Combined Chiefs of Staff. It consisted of the American and British Joint Chiefs of Staff, although the British Chiefs remained based in London, and were represented in Washington by a former Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill. A dynamic tension emerged between policy-makers and, until the middle of 1943, the Combined Chiefs of Staff gave the British the opportunity to foist many of their own strategic priorities onto the Americans. Even in 1944–45, when the balance of military power in the Anglo-American alliance had shifted in favour of the Americans, it did at least give them a platform from which they could make their voices heard.

But it would be wrong to think that harmony now reigned within the Anglo-American alliance. The British had won most of the strategic arguments in 1941 because they had come to the conference table carefully briefed, and because they had far more forces in contact with the enemy than did the Americans. But some American policy-makers were reluctant to accept all of the British proposals, suspecting that the emphasis the British placed on the Mediterranean was an attempt to divert American resources to defending British imperial interests. The US Navy, smarting from the Pearl

Harbor debacle, wanted to give priority to the Pacific War, and the army was sceptical of Churchill’s preference for a peripheral strategy, and his apparent insistence that it would be possible to defeat Germany without also beating its army in the field. General George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, opted for a more direct approach. He wanted to raise an army of as many as 200 divisions, deploy it on the plains of Northwest Europe, and smash a way by the shortest route into the Reich.

The British thought that Marshall was being naive in failing to recognize the formidable practical problems involved in fighting the Germans in Northwest Europe. The defeats that the British had suffered in Norway, France, Greece and Crete, not to mention memories of the horrific casualties their armies had endured in France between 1914 and 1918, had left them deeply impressed with the fighting power of the German army. Furthermore, the apparent willingness with which so many British soldiers had surrendered in France, North Africa and Singapore led Churchill, and some field commanders, to wonder if the army’s morale was sufficiently robust to sustain a long period of costly fighting. The destruction of the amphibious expedition they had sent to Norway, the heavy losses suffered by the Mediterranean fleet in evacuating troops from Crete in May 1941, and the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* by the Japanese, had demonstrated to them that the strategic flexibility which sea power had once conferred was a thing of the past. Those benefits could only be reaped if the marshalling of large fleets of surface warships, troop transports and specialized landing craft took place under the secure umbrella of friendly aircraft. If it was to be effective, sea power now had to be combined with air power, and bringing together the necessary components for successful amphibious operations was a time-consuming business. Unless the attacker achieved complete surprise, and by the use of his own air power could paralyse the movement of the enemy’s reserves from their inland concentration areas to the landing site, it was likely that the attacker might find himself pinned to the beaches. The failure of the British raid on the French port of Dieppe in August 1942 pointed to the pitfalls of mounting an invasion without adequate preparations.

Tensions between British and American military strategists about the future course of the war first emerged in April 1942, when the Americans tried to persuade the British to agree to an invasion of Northwest Europe in the spring of 1943. The British initially accepted the suggestion, although with

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the proviso that enough forces had to be maintained to protect the Middle East and Indian Ocean, which were then threatened by the appearance of Japanese warships in the Bay of Bengal. But when the proposals were subject to closer scrutiny, they showed that the forces that the Allies could muster for a cross-Channel invasion were totally inadequate. On paper, the British Army in the UK was a formidable force. But since 1940 it had been organized and equipped for one role – the defence of Britain against an invasion. It was an unbalanced organization, in which priority had been given to creating front-line fighting units, on the assumption that it would be able to draw upon civilian resources to meet many of its logistics needs. The British did not deliberately over-insure themselves to safeguard the home islands, but British industry could not provide the equipment needed by the supply, transport, communications, repair and medical units that the Home Forces would need if they were to throw off an expeditionary force to operate in an overseas theatre.11 By May 1942, the British Army could have sent no more than six properly supported divisions overseas, and as the Americans could commit even fewer troops, Churchill was able to veto the plan.

But the Western Allies could not afford to do nothing in 1942. President Roosevelt had promised Stalin that he would mount a second front in 1942 to take some of the pressure off the Red Army, and he also wanted to focus American public opinion on the European theatre at a time when Pearl Harbor had riveted their attention on the Pacific. In July 1942, therefore, he was willing to fall in with Churchill’s suggestion that an Anglo-American expeditionary force should land in northwest Africa to implement their strategy of tightening the ring around Germany. The American Chiefs of Staff were uncomfortable with what they believed was Churchill’s opportunistic strategy, and they were correct to argue that mounting Operation TORCH would divert so many resources from the build-up of forces in Britain that a cross-Channel invasion in 1943 would be impossible. But despite their misgivings, British and US forces began to land in French Morocco and Algeria on 8 November 1942. The difficulties they experienced in bringing that campaign to a successful conclusion suggested that the British had been right to reject a cross-Channel invasion in 1942.

Four days earlier, the British and Commonwealth forces of General Sir Bernard Montgomery’s Eighth Army had finally broken through the Axis positions at El Alamein, thus ending a period of nearly two years of fighting

along the North African littoral that had seen the front line seesaw from the western frontier of Cyrenaica to a line only sixty miles from Alexandria. By March 1941, less than two months after his arrival, Rommel had advanced to the frontier of Egypt and besieged the British garrison in Tobruk. In November 1941, the British mounted a successful counter-offensive, relieved Tobruk, and themselves advanced to the frontier of Cyrenaica. Rommel then mounted a brief counter-offensive that drove the Eighth Army eastward, and the two sides then settled down to prepare for their next offensive. The Axis struck first, and in June and July 1942 routed the Commonwealth forces and drove them back to the El Alamein position. Both sides were then exhausted, but Rommel’s supply lines were now dangerously overextended, and Allied submarines and aircraft based on Malta prevented more than a trickle of supplies and reinforcements from reaching him. At the same time, the El Alamein position offered the British a unique advantage. It was only sixty miles long and was one of the few defensive positions in North Africa that could not be outflanked to the south. The most important lesson that the British military had learned from the casualty lists of the Somme and Passchendaele was that never again would their countrymen allow them to be so prodigal with the lives of their men. Henceforth, if they had to fight on land, they would have to do so by using the maximum of machinery and firepower, and the minimum of manpower. El Alamein represented the first occasion during the Second World War when the British were able successfully to practise that doctrine. Reinforced by fresh troops and weapons, including 300 new US medium tanks, Montgomery used his superiority in manpower and machinery to wear down the Axis forces in what proved to be the decisive battle in the defence of Egypt. He then advanced westward along the North African coast, linked up with the Anglo-American forces in Tunisia, and together they accepted the surrender of the Axis armies in North Africa in May 1943.

The Casablanca Conference, which took place in January 1943, is best remembered as the moment when the Western Allies declared their intention of imposing unconditional surrender on the Axis Powers. But Churchill and Roosevelt also took three important strategic decisions. Defeating the U-boat offensive in the Atlantic had to be a top priority, to ensure both that Britain did not starve, and that American troops could reach Britain in safety.

They agreed to mount a combined bomber offensive from bases in Britain to weaken Germany’s war-making capability to the point at which an invasion of the Continent by the Allies would become possible. But when the Americans pressed once more for an early cross-Channel attack, Churchill again insisted that such an operation would be premature. The British and Americans had committed considerable land forces to the Mediterranean. They lacked the shipping and landing craft to mount a cross-Channel invasion in 1943, and they could not afford to do nothing after the collapse of the Axis position in North Africa, while the Russians continued to tie down the bulk of the Wehrmacht. So they opted to exploit their North African successes by invading Sicily, an operation that they hoped, when combined with naval and air attacks, would persuade Italy to surrender. If it worked, this ‘Mediterranean strategy’ would assist the Russians, and pave the way for a cross-Channel invasion in 1944, by forcing the Germans to assume heavy extra troop commitments, not only in Italy, but also in Italy’s Balkan empire.14

Casablanca was also significant because it was almost the last such occasion when the British were able to persuade the Americans to accept their strategic priorities. American military mobilization was gathering pace, and soon the military balance of power within the Anglo-American alliance would swing decisively toward Washington. The implications of that for Britain’s military strategy started to become apparent at the TRIDENT conference in Washington in May 1943. The British succeeded in persuading their allies that the invasion of Sicily should be followed by landings on the Italian mainland. Not only would that tie down still more German divisions which might otherwise be sent to the eastern front or northern France, but it would also allow the British and Americans the use of Italian airfields, from which they could bomb targets in Southeast and Central Europe, and give encouragement to resistance movements in the Balkans. But in return, the Americans were able to insist that a firm date, 1 May 1944, should be fixed for the cross-Channel invasion, codenamed OVERLORD. The Mediterranean would become a subsidiary theatre, a fact signified by the withdrawal of four American and three British divisions from there to Britain, in preparation for OVERLORD.15

British and American forces landed in Sicily in July 1943 and had occupied the whole island by mid-August. The operation did lead to Mussolini’s

overthrow, and in September Italy surrendered when Allied troops landed in the south of the country. The Germans proved to be unwilling as the British had hoped to give up the territory of their erstwhile ally, and by December 1943 they had dispatched twenty-five divisions to Italy itself, and another twenty divisions to retain control of the Balkans. The Mediterranean strategy, therefore, fulfilled its promise of diverting German forces from other theatres. But that should not hide the reality that OVERLORD would not have been possible in 1944, but for the fact that the Red Army tied down about two-thirds of the German army on the Eastern Front.

It is more difficult to assess the record of the British air offensive against Germany. At the start of the war, they had hoped to mount daylight precision bombing raids, but they quickly discovered that German fighter defences made such operations prohibitively expensive. Consequently, in the winter of 1940–41, they switched to night attacks against precision targets such as factories and railway marshalling yards. Their strategy failed for three reasons. They had too few aircraft, for by mid-1941, Bomber Command could only commit about 400 bombers to operations. Secondly, the Air Staff wrongly believed that the interdependence of a modern industrial economy would work in their favour. In fact, it worked against them, for although the German economy did have numerous bottlenecks, it also had alternative sources of power and supplies. Finally, the bombers could not hit precision targets. A study concluded in August 1941 that navigation errors meant that only 20 per cent of aircraft came to within even five miles of their targets.

In February 1942, Bomber Command received a new commander, Sir Arthur Harris. In the knowledge that the smallest target they could be sure of hitting at night was a medium-sized town, the Air Ministry told him that henceforth his bombers’ main mission was to destroy the morale of the enemy civilian population, and in particular of the industrial workers. This policy of area bombing was assisted by the introduction of new navigation and bomb-aiming aids, and the creation of an elite Pathfinder Force, whose mission was to fly in advance of the main bomber stream to find and mark targets for them. The availability of larger numbers of heavier bombers did enable Bomber Command to increase the tonnage of bombs dropped on Germany. They did compel the Germans to divert fighter aircraft, anti-aircraft guns and manpower from the fighting fronts to defend their cities and to clear up the damage. But they could not wreck the German economy nor win air

superiority over Western Europe. Between March 1943 and March 1944, Bomber Command mounted a series of campaigns against the Ruhr, Hamburg and Berlin, which inflicted massive casualties on the German civilian population and checked the expansion of German war production. But in the winter of 1943–44, the German defences were able to impose unacceptably heavy losses on the British bomber forces, and Harris had no option but to halt his attacks. His aircraft were then switched to interdicting German communications in France, in support of the Allied landing in Normandy, and by the time they resumed night attacks on Germany, in the autumn of 1944, the situation in the air had been transformed. In the spring and early summer of 1944, the long-range fighters of the US Eighth Air Force had destroyed the Luftwaffe’s fighter arm in a series of daylight raids over Germany. Air superiority had passed to the Allies, and in the final months of the war, Bomber Command, operating in conjunction with the US Eighth Air Force, flattened most of Germany’s cities, produced an oil famine and destroyed its transport system.

Winning air superiority over Western Europe was one essential precondition for OVERLORD. Winning the Battle of the Atlantic was another. It was all very well for Britain to have an ally, in the shape of the USA, with enormous economic potential that could, in time, be transformed into huge armies, navies and air forces. But the USA was 3,000 miles away, across the Atlantic, and it would avail the British nothing if they starved before American assistance arrived. By December 1941, the Allies had lost nearly 8 million tons of merchant shipping, and only one-third of it had been replaced by new launchings. The Allies finally prevailed because the Germans made mistakes – underestimating, for example, the tonnage they would have to sink to force Britain to surrender – and because Britain and its allies showed they could adjust better than their enemies to the changing demands of the U-boat war. Some factors that brought about the Allies’ victory had little to do with the British. They included the ability of US shipyards to replace merchant ships sunk by U-boats, and the ability of the US aircraft industry to produce the very long-range aircraft needed to provide Allied convoys with air cover over the mid-Atlantic. At sea, the Royal Navy, which included a large contingent drawn from the Royal Canadian Navy, employed convoys to protect its merchant ships, as it had done in 1917–18. The British also built large numbers of specialist anti-submarine escorts, and progressively equipped them with an array of scientific devices, including sonar to detect submerged U-boats, radar to detect them on the surface, and high-frequency radio detection equipment, to pinpoint their position at a distance. Scientific operational research
indicated the best ways to engage the enemy; and new weapons, such as the forward-firing hedgehog mortar, provided better ways of destroying U-boats once they had been detected. Finally, in June 1941, British code-breakers succeeded in cracking the German naval Enigma codes, and, although they lost access to German messages between February 1942 and early 1943, for as long as they could read them, they were able to plot the position of waiting wolf packs, and try to divert convoys away from danger areas.  

The Battle of the Atlantic convoys reached its climax in the spring of 1943. The Kriegsmarine now had so many U-boats at sea that the British could not route their convoys around them. But the convoy escorts knew their location, and at last they had the aircraft, ships, detection devices and weapons to destroy them. The U-boats were fought to a standstill in a battle of attrition they could not win. Between January and May 1943, the Germans lost nearly a hundred U-boats in the Atlantic. Such a loss rate was unsustainable, and at the end of the month, the German naval command admitted defeat and withdrew its forces.

The Second Front

In 1944–45, British air and naval power could not have liberated Western Europe. That could only be done if the Western Allies landed troops on the Continent and defeated the German army in the west in a ground war, something that Churchill was reluctant to accept until a surprisingly late stage in the war. When he went to Quebec for the QUADRANT conference in August 1943, he was not only intoxicated by the possible implications of Italy’s collapse, he was also still haunted by memories of the Western Front, and impressed by the ability the Germans had demonstrated in Sicily and Italy to wage a stubborn defensive war. Instead of OVERLORD, he wanted a major amphibious landing in northern Italy, so that in 1944 the Allies could advance either west into southern France or northeast into Austria. But his advocacy was in vain. The balance of power within the Grand Alliance was now tilted decisively against the British. When the Americans, British and Soviets met at Tehran in November 1943, the British were told that whether they liked it or not, OVERLORD would have priority and would take place in the spring of 1944.

But once the decision had been taken, Churchill did not shy away from its implications. If the British were to have a significant voice in the conduct of the operation, they had to be seen to be making a major contribution in terms of the resources they committed to it. But doing so was increasingly problematic, for Britain had passed the limits of its manpower reserves. Within days of his victory at El Alamein, Montgomery had been compelled to disband two divisions in order to maintain the rest at something near to their proper strength. In November 1943, the War Office had earmarked a dozen divisions for OVERLORD. Churchill did not think that was enough. The Americans were committing fifteen divisions in the first part of the campaign, and he insisted that the British had to match them. ‘We have carried the recent trouble entirely by mentioning that we had preponderance on the battlefront’, he wrote, and ‘We ought to have at least equality in this other critical task.’ The British also dominated much of the detailed planning and preparations for the initial landing, so that the eventual operation came about through a combination of American will, British brains and Anglo-American-Canadian muscle.

The Allied armies landed in Normandy in June 1944. Given America’s growing military preponderance, there was never really any doubt that their Supreme Commander would be an American. The man chosen was General Eisenhower, who had previously been the Supreme Allied Commander in Italy. But Britain’s contribution at sea, in the air and on land enabled them to claim the three subordinate posts of the naval, air and land forces commanders. After nearly two months of bitter fighting, the Anglo-American forces broke out from their beachheads in late July, and by the end of August had liberated Paris. Brussels fell in early September, but the Allies, beset by logistical problems, could not maintain the momentum of their advance. Montgomery was not a commander renowned for taking risks, but in September 1944 he belied his reputation for caution. He laid a carpet of three airborne divisions (two American and one British) across Holland in an attempt to secure a crossing over the Rhine. By doing so, he hoped that he could bring the war to a rapid end by advancing swiftly into the heart of Germany. Underpinning the operation was his knowledge that the British Army was now a wasting asset. Britain was now so short of men that he had already been forced to disband two of the divisions that had landed in Normandy. If the British were plausibly to claim to be a major military power

18 Churchill to Grigg, 6 November 1943. TNA WO 259/77.
19 I am grateful to John Ferris for this point.
at the end of the war, the fighting had to be finished quickly, preferably by a
knockout blow delivered by British forces, and while the British could still
maintain an army of some size in the field. But tactical errors, poor weather
which delayed the arrival of reinforcements to the Arnhem bridgehead, and
unexpectedly strong German resistance meant that the operation ended in
failure, and the Allies were exposed to a further winter of war. It was only in
March 1945 that Montgomery’s forces crossed the Rhine in a carefully planned
operation, and then advanced westward until all German forces in northern
Germany, Holland and Denmark surrendered on 4 May.

The war in the Far East

After the fall of Singapore, the ‘Europe first’ strategy meant that the main
weight of the burden of containing and then defeating Japan fell on the USA
and China. The Americans were responsible for the conduct of the Pacific
War, and Britain abdicated her responsibility for the defence of Australia and
New Zealand in favour of the USA. The British effort in the war against Japan
focused largely on the Burma front and the defence of India. Churchill was
intent on reconquering Britain’s lost empire in Southeast Asia, but he wanted
to avoid a costly land campaign in Burma, by outflanking the Japanese
through mounting amphibious operations against either Singapore or north-
er Sumatra. However, the British did not have the shipping or landing craft
for such operations, and the Americans would not provide them. The
Americans were not interested in supporting a campaign they thought was
designed to re-establish British imperial power. Burma was only important to
them in as much as its reconquest would pave the way for reopening land
communications between India and China via the ‘Burma road’. That, in
turn, would enable them to send supplies to Chinese Nationalist forces tying
down a large part of the Japanese army in the interior of China.

That the British and Commonwealth forces did succeed in reopening a land
route to China and reconquering Burma overland owed at least as much to
Japanese miscalculations as it did to their own foresight. In the spring of 1943, a
brigade under Brigadier Orde Wingate crossed the Chindwin River and
entered northern Burma. Wingate’s troops operated in small, independent

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20 S. A. Hart, Montgomery and ‘Colossal Cracks’: The 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe,
1944–45 (London and Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000); J. Buckley, Montgomery’s Men:
The British Army and the Liberation of Europe, 1944–45 (New Haven, Conn. and London:
columns, supplied entirely by air-drops. Their objective was to attack Japanese lines of communication, and although their material impact was slight, they not only proved to the British themselves that ordinary soldiers, with the appropriate training, could master the problems of jungle warfare, they also undermined the myth that the Japanese were military supermen. But most important of all, they provoked the Japanese into invading Assam, where they played into the hands of the Anglo-Indian Fourteenth Army and its commander, Sir William Slim. Slim had three advantages over his enemy. They were operating at the end of lengthy and inadequate lines of communication. He was operating near to his base. Even when the Japanese surrounded his formations, they could sit tight and fight because the existence of US transport aircraft meant they could be supplied by air. And fight they did, because since 1942, the British and Indian army formations he commanded had been transformed. Rigorous training in the demands of jungle warfare had given his soldiers the confidence that they had lacked in 1941–42. The result was that when the Japanese clashed with Slim’s forces in the twin battles of Imphal and Kohima in March and April 1944, they found it impossible to overcome their stubborn resistance. British artillery, air power and small arms killed large numbers of the attackers, and even more died from disease and starvation as their logistics collapsed during their retreat. That enabled Slim to encircle the remaining Japanese forces in Burma at Meiktila in central Burma, and to retake Rangoon in May 1945.²¹

The reconquest of Burma was a military triumph for the Fourteenth Army, but it played almost no part in bringing about the final defeat of Japan. By early 1945, the American air and naval blockade had crippled the Japanese economy, and American amphibious forces had broken through the Japanese defensive perimeter in the Pacific and enabled the Americans to establish airbases within range of the Japanese home islands. The British sent a fleet to assist the Americans in the Pacific, partly to demonstrate to the ‘anti-imperialist’ Americans that they were not just concerned to reconquer their empire, but were also willing to fight the Japanese on their homeland, and partly to ensure they could claim a voice at the peace conference. But it gave them little influence over US strategy. In August 1945, without consulting his allies, Roosevelt’s successor, President Truman, obviated the need for an invasion of Japan and forced the Japanese government to surrender by dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Conclusion

British military strategy during the Second World War reflected the strategic culture that its policy-makers had developed since the eighteenth century. In 1940, the Navy and RAF combined to deter a German invasion of the home islands, and the Navy was able to safeguard Britain’s maritime lines of communication. The two services also worked together to apply pressure on the German Empire in Western Europe at a time when British land forces had been expelled from the Continent. Together with the army, they combined to protect many of Britain’s overseas possessions in the Mediterranean and Middle East, although not in the Far East. The British also showed that they could overcome two of the most difficult problems that confronted the belligerents. They created a successful working relationship between military planners and civilian leaders, both at the national and, with the Americans, at the inter-allied levels. Once again with the Americans, they also overcame the manifold practical problems inherent in conducting joint operations involving all three services. But the British alone could not have hoped to defeat the Axis Powers. Paradoxically, it was during the Second World War, when their control over their empire was loosening, that the British came to rely more heavily than ever before on imperial manpower to fight their wars. Of the 103 divisions that the British mobilized, no fewer than 54 were raised in the Dominions, colonies or India. The empire also provided nearly 40 per cent of the RAF’s aircrews. But the single most important factor in ensuring that Britain ended the war among the victors was that in 1941 it entered into successful burden-sharing arrangements with the USA and USSR. To the extent that the human price the British paid between 1939 and 1945 was a great deal lighter than that of some of their allies, this policy was a success. The British suffered 325,000 fatalities during the war, a figure that included more than 60,000 civilians killed by German bombing. This was a good deal higher than the 274,000 combat deaths suffered by the USA, but it was only a minute fraction of the roughly 27 million Soviet citizens who were killed during the war.